Anatomy of an Erie Canal Embankment Leak

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From the time we bought our home along the North Bank of the Erie Canal my wife, Sandy, & I have loved living in Brockport. Of course when we moved in the canal embankment was MUCH thicker, in fact we couldn’t even see an opening when we first took ownership.

Over time the things changed on our property, at the start we lived in a very heavily wooded lot, about 2 acres within the Village Line and much of it was neglected by the previous owners. As we started to clear the land we discovered a rather large area on our eastern side that was CONSTANTLY wet.
No matter the time of year, no matter how much or little precipitation came it went from ankle deep mush to large areas of standing water. It was worse in the winter, but also bad on wetter summers. Over time, I came to understand that in fact MANY old timers in town actually came here to ice skate every winter on a large pond.

So like any Erie Canal Neighbor would I contacted the New York Canal Corporation to ask if this was a leak from the waterway in our backyard. This was in the late 1990s when ownership of the Canal was with the NY Thruway Authority and NO ONE had even heard of the Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor.

They sent some one down, who we NEVER saw, who reported back to our contact who told us “Our wet yard was NOT a result of “their” water, sorry, thank you for calling”. So like any resourceful homeowner Sandy & I decided to find out how much water was really there. I worked with an excavator and pushed enough soil around to see what would happen.
Cleared a “slice” of land down about 10” deep by 20” wide & 100’ long and waited until Autumn to see what happens. We had uncovered so much “trash” that prior homeowners had tossed here over the years but in the end we hit Medina quarry stone about 10” down in most places.

Near the end of October into early November that first year water started to seep in this new “pond”. It kept filling, day after day, until one day it reached a small pipe I put in the end that was there to let water out. Well in a week the pond was FULL and overflowing as the ½” pipe simply could not keep up.
Since then we’ve almost doubled the size of our “skating pond” and created an overflow system NYPA would say was Top Shelf. Since then with a little time on a compact tractor the pond is now 160’ long, between 30’ & 60’ wide and holds about 85000 gallons of water that flows from a 2” outlet pipe for weeks in early winter.
As you can see the source of the water lies AT the Toe of Slope on the Erie Canal embankment. It flows visibly at times in a quarter sized hole, a hole that we have been unable to find UNTIL the Embankment Repair Project cleared the earthen dam that borders our property. It is flowing freely these days as Canal water, mixes with a higher water table & snow melt runoff.

Coincidentally the Canal Corporation has recently marked the area ABOVE our pond with a wooden stake and added this leak to their list of those they are actively monitoring. I simply uncovered the problem trying to make “lemonade out
of lemons” and since the change of ownership has happened to NY Power Authority this is finally being seen for what it is... an Erie Canal Dam leak.

Our grandkids will catch pollywogs in the pond this Spring, the sound of “peepers” will fill the property and we will probably see our perennial pair of mating Mallard Ducks again this year. I doubt whether this type of leak can be easily repaired, may be more fundamental water loss due to antiquated dam design & construction.
Maybe this particular “leak” will need to be monitored long after Sandy & I leave this place, in any case those who say the Canal Bank is just fine “as is” do NOT understand the entire Dam system that is running through their neighborhood. Without proper, regular inspection of the exposed, earthen embankment that makes up 1/3 of the overall Erie Canal length, leaks like this can turn into a disaster that this PROJECT, which is squarely pointed at PROPER dam bank remediation & grooming, is trying to prevent.

Some should think twice before standing in the way of Safety